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UPPER TULEDAD VALLEY HABITAT RESTORATION AND FUELS REDUCTION PROJECT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS DOI-BLM-CA-N070-0024-FONSI

BACKGROUND

The BLM Surprise Field Office (SFO) is proposing 2,562 acres of habitat restoration and hazardous fuels reduction treatments in the Tuledad and Selic Alaska Allotments which encompasses 148,259 acres of public lands in the south western portion of the Surprise Field Office. There are two proposed individual treatments. These projects would restore sage-steppe habitat for sage-steppe obligate species, reduce hazardous fuels, treat western juniper in sage steppe plant communities which are decadent or declining in vigor as a result of competition and protect priority habitat areas.

Juniper woodlands throughout the Great Basin and other geographic regions are expanding into habitats historically dominated by perennial grasses, sagebrush and other native shrubs (Tausch, 1999; Brockway, et. al, 2002; West, et. al, 1998). In some areas, long-term fire suppression efforts, excessive grazing, and drought-related conditions have led to the conversion of sagebrush/grass communities to areas dominated by homogenous stands of sagebrush, with declining, remnant populations of native perennial forbs and grasses. In some areas the establishment of juniper on sagebrush/grass sites has resulted in the loss of the grass and forb component and led to decadence and low vigor of important shrub species, such as antelope bitterbrush. When valuable grass, forb and shrub species decline, excessive surface runoff and soil erosion, reduced soil moisture and decreased groundwater recharge may occur (Bedell, 1993; Thurow, 2005). Reduced soil moisture and the competition of woody species for light, nutrients and moisture has resulted in reduced forage for wildlife, livestock and wild horses. Additionally, on many woodland ecological sites, the natural diversity of successional stages has been changed toward a preponderance of mature even-aged stands, which do not support a natural diversity of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Proper functioning ecological sites have a diversity of grasses, forbs, shrubs, and trees and are essential to watershed integrity by stabilizing soils, promoting water infiltration and providing sufficient soil cover. A decline in the ecological condition of these plant communities adversely affects rangeland health, wildlife habitat, soil stability and other watershed values over the long-term.

Treatments would be completed using several methods including hand clearing, mechanical thinning and cutting, prescribed burning, or a combination of these treatments. Work would be completed by either Federal or contract personnel. The byproducts of these treatments would be made available for firewood collection or biomass harvest, piled and burned on site or scattered and left to decompose naturally.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the actions will not have a significant effect on the human environment other than those already analyzed in the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy EIS. All environmental effects for this decision (listed below) have been discussed and disclosed in the EA, therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required prior to implementing treatments in the project area.

CONTEXT

The project area is located south and southwest of Eagleville, CA, in Lassen County, California. The Upper Tuledad Valley restoration unit consists of 2,315 acres located in Tuledad Canyon. The proposed project area can be found on Little Hat Mountain 7 ½ topographic map with the following legal description: Township 37 North, Range 17 East, Sections 31, 32, 33 and 34, Township 36 North, Range 16 East, Section 1 and Township 36 North Range 17 East Sections 4, 5, 6, and 7.

The Tuledad aspen restoration unit consists of 247 acres. The proposed project area can be found on Boot Lake 7 ½ topographic map with the following legal description: Township 37 North, Range 16 East Sections 8 and 17.

Vegetation inhabiting the project area is composed of sagebrush-grass associations distributed among ecologically distinct zones. Big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) is the dominant shrub species. The primary big sagebrush varieties found in the project area are Mountain big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata ssp. vaseyana*) and Wyoming big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata ssp. wyomingensis*). Mountain big sagebrush communities are found on moister sites at higher elevations where juniper encroachment is more prevalent. The largest portion of the Upper Tuledad Project Area is comprised of a Mountain big sagebrush-Antelope bitterbrush (*Purtia tridentata)* associations with bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegnaria spicata)* being the dominant grass species. Where soil is less rocky and has a higher water holding capacity, basin wildrye (*Leymus cinereus)* is present. In the Upper Tuledad Aspen Project Area where elevation ranges from 7000-7500 feet, and annual precipitation exceeds 15 inches annually, mountain big sagebrush cohabits with mountain brome and bottlebrush squirrel tail. Needlegrass species make up a minor component. Wyoming big sagebrush occurs on drier sites with moderately deep soils occurring at elevations up to 6,000 feet within the Project Area. Low sagebrush occurs as inclusions within Wyoming big sagebrush sites throughout the Project Area. Historically, Juniper woodlands were restricted to landforms such as rimrock, scree slopes and boulder fields that are protected from fire by soil types that limit the production of fine fuels to carry fire (Barret, 2007). However, increased fire suppression has allowed juniper to extend beyond its traditional boundaries. Although juniper woodlands in the historical context do exist within the Project Area, the vast majority of juniper populating the Project Area is new growth.

Aspen is a major component inhabiting the Tuledad Aspen Project Area. Aspen within the Project Area are currently threatened by competition from juniper and to some extent, mountain big sagebrush due to the lack of a disturbance event.

INTENSITY

1) *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

The EA has considered both beneficial and adverse impacts of the habitat restoration and hazardous fuels reduction project. Considering all impacts, the project will result in reduced fuel loads, improved vegetative condition and fire resiliency for the project area under consideration. Reduced fuel loading will reduce the risk of damage from wildfire within the project area. Benefits included overall habitat improvement, improved watershed stability, and establishment of a more fire resilient ecological community are expected over time. A return of the natural fire regime and vegetative conditions is considered as merely improving the quality of the human environment through proactive treatments and fire management. Impacts that could be adverse include erosion in treated areas that could occur with high intensity precipitation events for the first few (several) years following treatment. The project design of treating areas in a mosaic fashion should mitigate effects from erosion. The proposed action is expected to reduce overall adverse impacts to natural resources.

2) *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

The proposed action will result in improved public health and safety by reducing the fuel load, and minimizing the risk of damage due to uncontrolled wildland fires. Proposed treatment designs and mitigating measures would minimize impacts to public health and safety. A prescribed burn plan will be completed and a smoke permit will be attained to address public health and safety from burning.

Public health and safety will be compromised if treatments are not implemented in the area. Vegetation and soil are at substantial risk of wildfire due to fuels buildup and the frequency of summer lightning storms, and would be at immediate risk of erosion from a wildfire if it were to occur.

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

The project area is representative of the Great Basin in vegetative condition and ecological functionality. The project area does not contain any park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers. The area is not considered an ecologically critical area, but failure to take action to reduce risk from wildfire could place the area at ecological risk from erosion and/or the establishment of noxious or invasive weeds following a large wildfire.

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The treatments in the proposed action will allow for attainment of resource objectives. The treatment design features and mitigating measures associated with the treatments will minimize adverse impacts to the quality of the human environment. In the long term, benefits will be realized to the quality of the human environment as vegetation diversity will increase, and wildfire sizes will be decreased. The effects resulting from the proposed treatments are not likely to be highly controversial.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The treatment methods to be used are accepted standard practices, and the effects of the treatments do not involve unique or unknown risks. Mitigation measures and standard operating procedures have been included in the treatment designs to address known risks and uncertainties. Prescribed burning carries a level of uncertainty as local weather conditions could change at any moment. However, uncertainty will be eliminated or reduced to very low levels through development of a prescribed burn plan that will set the conditions allowed for burning. Monitoring is also incorporated in the project design to address any uncertainty.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*
The actions associated with this project, and as identified in the EA do not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. While monitoring data from this project might be used to determine appropriate actions in future similar type projects, those projects would be subject to environmental assessment standards and as independent decision-making processes.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*
All resources have been evaluated for cumulative impacts in the EA and no significant impacts were identified. Other fuels reduction and vegetation treatment projects may be proposed in Tuledad and the south Warner Mountains. These projects seen together with anticipated future proposed land disturbing activities in the area would not result in cumulatively significant impacts at the local or watershed scale. Overall, future similar projects would improve vegetation and habitat diversity and protect watersheds from erosion and hazards from large wildfires. As standard procedure, future projects would be subject to cumulative impact analysis and review on an area-specific case-by-case basis.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*
Mitigation measures associated with the actions address protection of eligible historic and cultural properties that occur in the project area. Identified cultural and historic properties would be avoided or mitigation actions completed prior to treatment to prevent adverse impacts.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.*
It has been determined that there are no federally listed threatened or endangered species in the project area.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*
The proposed action will not violate or threaten to violate any Federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed and alternative actions are in conformance with the Surprise Resource Management Plan (2008), and the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy Final Environmental Impact Statement (2008). The proposed and alternative actions are also consistent with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003) and the *Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and*

the Environment, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy (2001), and other Federal, state, and local policies and plans to the maximum extent possible.

/s/ Heather Whitman **09/12/14**

Heather Whitman Date
Acting Field Office Manager